

12

February 20, 2011

Testimony of Jill Bicks, Executive Director, Child Advocates of CT,

Related to Senate Bill Number 981:

AN ACT CONCERNING THE PLACEMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN CONGREGATE CARE FACILITIES, to prohibit the Commissioner of Children and Families from placing children under the age of six, or sibling groups with a child under the age of six, in congregate care facilities unless necessary for health reasons.

Representative Urban, Senator Musto, Representative Fawcett, distinguished members of the Select Committee on Children, thank you for your time and attention to the issues before you today. My name is Jill Bicks and I am the Executive Director of Child Advocates of CT, a nonprofit organization serving the Juvenile Courts of Stamford and Danbury by training and supervising community volunteers to act as court-appointed monitors and Guardians ad litem on behalf of children in abuse/neglect proceedings.

As I understand it, the bill under consideration is meant to address concerns that it is detrimental for children under 6 years of age to be in a congregate care setting with multiple caregivers and that the length of stay for children in such placements currently lasts too long.

While I believe it is a laudatory goal that all children be placed in home settings when parents are unable or unwilling to properly care for them, the sad reality is that, particularly in Fairfield County, Connecticut, there is a dearth of appropriate foster homes available. The result of eliminating congregate care facilities for children under the age of six, would be that the youngest children and their siblings in Fairfield County would necessarily be placed far from their homes, schools and families, causing further disruption and trauma to these fragile children.

It is in a child's best interest to receive treatment and care close to home. It is more likely that the child will maintain existing relationships and benefit from established connections that local community providers have with one another. These connections are crucial to children's short and long-term stability and success. It is virtually impossible to achieve the goal of reunification when children are not in close proximity to their family and community.

Likewise, even very young children can benefit from high-quality congregate care. Research shows that the needs of infants, often regarded as the easiest population to work with, are often invisible to the court and child welfare system. The vast majority are

prenatally exposed to maternal substance abuse and 40% are born low birthweight or prematurely, increasing the likelihood of chronic medical conditions, developmental delay, and disability. Research shows that a significant number of babies in foster care do not receive even basic healthcare such as immunizations. Developmental and emotional delays are even less likely to be identified and addressed. And despite compelling evidence of the positive effects of early childhood intervention programs, children in foster care are substantially less likely to receive these services. Thus, placement in a highly quality congregate care facility can actually be beneficial for very young children, if they are provided with essential physical and developmental health assessments and referrals to critical services.

The fact that the State believes that children spend too much time in congregate care – primarily because the Department of Children and Families cannot find appropriate foster home placements – is further reason NOT to support this bill.

I ask you to consider this: if local community congregate care facilities are not allowed to take these young children, where are they to go?

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